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ABSTRACT

Regents College of the University of the State of New York (USNY) offers nursing degree programs that are self-paced and accessible for adult learners. Students receive guided independent study in the form of advisement and degree planning, but learning course content is the responsibility of the student. An evaluation of the program was conducted to provide educational accountability and address criticisms that Regents College nursing graduates lack necessary experience to be fully socialized members of the profession. A random sample of graduates from the Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN, n=2,800) and the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN, n=1,900) degree programs were sent questionnaires, and their supervisors were also sent questionnaires. With response rates ranging from 51 to 76 percent, results indicated that over 90 percent of graduates remained in nursing. Nearly half of the BSN graduates went on to earn advanced degrees and 20 percent of the ADN graduates went on to earn the BSN. Participation in professional activities (conference attendance and regular reading of professional journals) was reported by nearly all alumnae. Corroborating evidence about alumnae level of professional competence and participation in professional activities was obtained from supervisors. Supervisors rated Regents College nursing graduates as slightly better on nursing skills and critical thinking skills than traditional graduates of campus-based programs. (JDD)

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Student Outcomes Using a Cross-Sectional Design for Nursing External Degree Programs

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Abstract

Evaluation of two NLN accredited national distance nursing programs assessed student outcomes employing a cross-sectional design. Post-graduation outcome measures were obtained from surveys sent to ADN and BSN alumnae and their supervisors. Outcome data obtained from the studies indicated that external degree graduates from associate and baccalaureate nursing programs continued to engage in a variety of professional and educational activities, indicating that professional socialization occurred. Supervisors rated on-the-job performance of external degree graduates as slightly better than graduates from traditional nursing programs. Employment patterns across the different graduation years provided evidence of career mobility. In general, student post-graduation outcomes clearly showed that an assessment-based nursing curriculum provides a pool of competently prepared professional nurses.

Introduction

Regents College, of the University of the State New York (USNY), is a pioneer in non-traditional pathways in nursing education. The nursing degrees offered through Regents College were designed to provide maximum accessibility and flexibility for adult learners, primarily with some health care background, to pursue a nursing degree in a self-paced, independent study manner. Educational barriers that can result from frequent moves, or career and family responsibilities are eliminated, since the degree programs do not contain any residency requirements and are open-admissions. The philosophy of the college is that college-level learning is not restricted to campus-based programs but rather can take place off-campus in a variety of situations. Regents College nursing programs is also one of the largest nursing schools in the United States with current enrollments of approximately 9000 nursing students (6300 ADN 2700 BSN).

To assist adult learners in their pursuit of higher education goals while juggling family and work responsibilities, the focus within the nursing degree programs has been in the development of an array of assessment instruments to measure nursing cognitive skills (knowledge of theories, fundamental of nursing practice, etc.) and clinical skills. The nursing curriculums are based on an assessment

model; that is, student's nursing competencies are assessed through a variety of performance and paper-and-pencil examinations which measure end-point college level competencies for the entire nursing component of the curriculums. One consequence in adopting such a curriculum, one based solely on an assessment of competency, is that it is possible to obtain a degree in a clinical discipline such as nursing, by completing a series of examinations. Few students, less than 3%, opt for the difficult route in earning a nursing degree entirely by examination; most pursue their nursing degrees by successfully completing a combination of campus-based courses, college level proficiency examinations and Regents College examinations.

The nursing programs at Regents College are unique in that students truly earn their degrees external to the institution. Students obtain guided independent study in the form of advisement, and degree planning, but learning content for nursing or the general education component of the curriculum is the responsibility of the student. Regents College is one of the few institutions that has over twenty years of knowledge and experience in providing performance assessments for clinical nursing skills at both the associate and baccalaureate levels.

While the program fully recognizes that its curriculum and approach to nursing education is certainly not for everyone, it does however, provide sound nursing education. Individuals who

have good organizational and time management skills and who are self-directed and initiating in their learning style, who have significant health care experience are good candidates for the Regents College program. Student profiles for a typical nursing student is a female between the ages of 38-39, working full-time, married with few children and employed in health care (LPN for ADN degree and RN for BSN degree) for about a decade.

Early in-house graduate follow-up studies found that indeed the curriculums were effective in producing competent professional nurses. But despite the initial positive results from post graduate studies and the programs consistently high pass rates, 90-95% on the NCLEX, many educators harbored doubts and questioned the long-term success of Regents College nursing graduates. Criticisms also involved the notion of professional socialization, claiming that such nurses lacked the experiences necessary to be fully socialized members of the nursing profession. In an attempt to address some of these criticisms and as a way to provide educational accountability, comprehensive program evaluation studies were undertaken to investigate student outcomes for both the ADN and BSN degree programs. Variables included in the evaluation studies were alumnae responses to a post-graduation survey, supervisor ratings of graduates' nursing competency and measures obtained from the graduate's academic records such as GPA, program

completion time, performance on Regents College assessments and a sundry of other items. The program sought to provide an empirical base to demonstrate the long-term impact of a non-traditional educational model, as well as examine the overall quality and endurance of professional competencies of adult learners in alternative pathways in nursing education.

Method

Employing a cross-sectional design, a random sample of Regents College graduates from the ADN degree (drawn from the first graduation year 1976 up through 1988) and BSN degree programs (drawn from the first graduation year 1979 up through 1990) were selected, N= 2800 and N=1900, respectively, and sent a Post-Graduation questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire measured a variety of student outcomes such as current position, specializations, certifications, participation in professional activities, and appraisal of work performance. The post-graduation survey also requested alumnae to identify a supervisor whom we could contact to verify their work performance. Supervisors were then sent a questionnaire that requested them to evaluate a variety of nursing skills and competencies and professional activities (participation in continuing education, etc.)

Results

Good return rates were obtained for all of the survey instruments ranging from 51% to 76%. Results indicated that

over 90% of graduates remained within the nursing profession. Most ADN graduates were employment in a hospital in acute care settings. Career mobility was indicated by clear trends and changes in occupational titles across the different waves of graduates. Career mobility, however was most evident for the ADN graduate.

Data on the outcomes portion of the study indicated high levels of achievement among graduates from both the associate as well as baccalaureate degrees. Nearly half of the graduates from the BSN program earned advanced degrees and 20% of the ADN graduates went on to earn the BSN. Furthermore, over half of the graduates obtained a variety of certifications/specializations. Participation in professional activities (conference attendance, regular reading of professional journals) were reported by nearly all alumnae. Corroborating evidence about alumnae accomplishments and level of professional competence and participation in professional activities were obtained from supervisors. Supervisors rated Regents College nursing graduates as slightly better on a variety of nursing skills and critical thinking skills than traditional, campus-based graduates. Supervisors reported that Regents College alumnae were highly motivated, self-directed and possessed confidence in their nursing skills. Over 80% indicated that they recommended the external degree program to others. Qualitative data from supervisors provided support of

overall program objectives, such as many stated that the program provided accessibility to higher education and flexible degree options for working adults.

In general, the data strongly supported the notion that the external degree curriculums produced competent, and professionally socialized nurses for the workplace.

Discussion

The complete set of results generated by these studies strongly supports the success of the Regents College distance education assessment model as a viable alterative to campus-based programs for working adults. The nursing program succeeds in alleviating the national nursing shortage by providing society with competent nurses who continue to be active members in the profession. Evidence supports the notion that the program is responding to community needs by: 1) enabling individuals facing barriers common to traditional higher education a vehicle to pursue a career goal and 2) by producing graduates who remain within the nursing profession and who are employed in hospitals setting where the greatest staffing needs exist. Graduates reported that most barriers or problems actually came from other nurse coworkers. Many nurses are unfamiliar with the rigorous requirements of the Regents College program and perceive it as an inferior type of degree. Career mobility and high achievement in formal educational settings were one of the strongest outcome measures found in

these studies. Regents College nursing programs successfully provides working adults with an alternative option to pursue a higher education degree.